

222

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MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Lebanon: The Worst Cases

If events in Lebanon over the past year offer a guide to the future, the current hopeful signs that the country may still be spared a final convulsion of violence will prove transitory. Even if the process now underway to replace President Franjiyah is completed, the prospect for avoiding another round of fighting is still bleak. Deeply antagonistic religious and ideological groups will find it difficult if not impossible to reach a realistic basis for compromise on a broad political settlement. Moreover, extremists on both the Christian and Muslim sides will be quick to exercise what veto powers they have through violence. Under the best circumstances, Lebanon will emerge with a weak central government with virtually no power of its own to prevent a resumption of civil strife or to reconstruct and unite an essentially divided country.

This gloomy forecast raises the question of whether events in Lebanon will lead to broader conflict in the Middle East. The greatest and most immediate danger is that Syria will continue to increase the number of its regular forces in Lebanon and, thus, prompt a counter-move by Israel. Although any Israeli intervention is likely to be confined at least initially to southern Lebanon, it could set in motion events that would draw the two sides dangerously close to hostilities. A danger of lesser immediacy but of no lesser consequence is that Israel will come more openly to the aid of the Christians should they suffer further military losses or declare for partition. A third possibility--although less likely under present conditions--is that fedayeen or Muslim extremists operating in southern Lebanon will begin shelling Israeli settlements or step up cross-border raids in the hope that this will provoke Israel and force Syria to take up the leftist cause.

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Syria's calculated gamble in introducing large numbers of Syrian regulars into Lebanon over the last week attests to President Asad's determination to maintain the current cease-fire and to force a political solution on the Lebanese that accommodates Syrian interests. Asad believes that Syria's interests are best served for the present by a neutral Lebanon rather than a militant pro-Arab, pro-Palestinian one, and that this objective coincides with those of Israel and the US. Asad's recent actions have been calculated with these considerations in mind and have been taken at considerable risk to his domestic position, leftist credentials, and international prestige.

Although Asad almost certainly is constantly re-evaluating his position, we believe he has recently decided to press on with his gamble in hopes that he can overawe the militant Muslim coalition under Kamal Jumblatt and force cooperation from PLO chief Yasir Arafat, all without provoking the Israelis. We expect him to continue the build-up of Syrian regulars and to tighten the blockade of arms and supplies to the Lebanese leftists until he believes they are sufficiently chastened.

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The great danger, of course, is that Asad will misjudge the limits of Israel's acceptance of increased numbers of Syrian troops in Lebanon, their disposition in areas close to the Israeli border, and the length of their stay. Asad's determination to see his policy through, his demonstrated willingness to act without assurances of Israeli restraint, and the possibility that he will misinterpret and, therefore, not heed Israeli warning signals will increase the risk of conflict.

The events of the next few critical weeks will largely determine Syria's next move. The appearance of Syrian troops seems to have already had a sobering effect on Jumblatt and his leftist allies, renegade army leader Ahmad Khatib and Muslim radical leader Ibrahim Qulaylat. If President Franjiah does, in fact, resign before the expiration of the cease-fire as most indications suggest, Jumblatt will probably go along with continued mediation efforts, extend the truce--now due to expire on April 30. This would greatly reduce the likelihood of Syria sending additional troops into Lebanon.

Given the apparent effectiveness of Syria's blockade of arms to the leftists, it is questionable whether Jumblatt's forces would try to launch a sustained offensive against the Christians, even if there were a hitch in the plans for Franjiah's departure. This judgment, of course, is based on the assumption that Yasir Arafat--mindful of recent Syrian warnings--will continue to play a moderating role with regard to Jumblatt, at least as long as hopes for continued mediation are still alive.

If the fighting does resume at a level close to that of last month, the Syrians will probably build up their forces in the north around Tripoli, in the area east of Beirut, and the central Bekaa Valley where the struggle is likely to be most intense. This could involve the introduction of new troops with heavy weaponry, the repositioning of Syrian forces in the north near Tripoli, or both.

Whether Damascus would try to extend its control to supply points and military installations deep in southern Lebanon is uncertain. This is not an area of contest between Christians and Muslims and would be relatively free of fighting.

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This force would probably be sufficient to maintain the arms blockade; however, it would not be capable of containing disruptive action by fedayeen rejectionists and those elements of the rebel Muslim army that remained behind in the south during the fighting in March.

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During the seizure of army installations by Khatib's forces last month, radical elements repeatedly threatened to shell Israeli settlements or take other provocative action, presumably on the theory that this would spark Israel to action and thus draw Syria and perhaps other Arabs into the fray on the leftist side. Remembering this, the Syrians might feel compelled to send some additional forces into the Marj Ayun area and Nabatiyah where Khatib's forces are believed to be based.

Even if a resumption of fighting is avoided and negotiations proceed relatively smoothly, we believe Syria fully intends to keep some forces in Lebanon. Damascus no longer regards elements of the 5,000 Palestine Liberation Army troops under its sponsorship as reliable props for Syrian policy, and it will want its own troops close at hand to keep Syrian mediation efforts on track.

Moreover, the Syrians see the presence of their regulars as the only effective force to counteract Egyptian, Iraqi, and Libyan meddling. Damascus is especially worried about Egyptian-controlled elements of the PLA now based in Lebanon. As Damascus is keenly aware, Egypt's preoccupation throughout the Lebanese crisis has been to undercut efforts to impose a settlement that would entrench Syria's influence in Lebanon and, with it, control over the Palestinian movement. The Syrian blockade of Tripoli and Sidon almost certainly was instituted out of concern that Egypt might try to resupply the Palestinians and the Lebanese left.

The potential volatility of the Lebanese situation and Syria's concern over competition with Egypt strongly suggest that Damascus will gamble very high stakes in order to remain in Lebanon. Indeed, the duration of Syria's stay perhaps more than the size or position of its forces may ultimately be the principal element of risk. A prolonged Syrian presence in Lebanon would put considerable pressure on the Rabin government to react to what would almost certainly be perceived by most Israelis as a de facto Syrian occupation of Lebanon.

The Israelis are most likely to intervene if large Syrian armored forces moved into Lebanon or if Syrian regular forces began to move into an area roughly along and to the south of the Litani River. A large-scale buildup in this area of the PLA or Lebanese radical leftist forces would also probably provoke an Israeli military response. The Israelis will probably continue to tolerate the presence of some fedayeen and leftist forces in the south, but they would react if these groups increased the level and intensity of attacks on Israeli settlements or stepped up cross-border operations.

There is also a reasonable possibility of Israeli intervention if the Christians seemed to be on the verge of being overpowered in a new round of fighting and sought Israeli assistance to forestall defeat. Moreover, if the Israelis were convinced that the imminent partition of Lebanon was at hand they would likely intervene to protect their position in the postwar bargaining.

Israeli military intervention is likely to be confined to southern Lebanon with the possible exception of operations, such as air strikes, in direct support of Christian forces. The size of Israeli forces involved and the duration and depth of the intervention would depend on the nature of the threat perceived. If the Syrians intervened on a massive scale, the Israelis would respond in kind. If the objective were to counter a terrorist threat, the Israelis would limit the size of the intervention force, the depth of its penetration, and the length of its stay.